

CII\Blight (CUBA II)

Notes on JG Blight, Fear and Learning in a Nuclear Crisis, August 23 (Sunday), 1987

60: WWI was not just an example of deterrence that failed. The outbreak of WWI was an episode in which both the structural and procedural measures that were meant to produce deterrence--the static and dynamic underpinnings of the deterrent threats, the implementation of deterrent policies--contributed and led directly to the onset of war, made it likely and then inescapable, produced the failure of deterrence.

What was involved was, as now, a mixture of "deterrent" and "compellent" threats, corresponding to Type I and Type II deterrence, the former relating to the deterrence of direct attack on one's own country, the latter to the protection or advancement of foreign policy goals outside one's country. These interacted, in an explosive way.

--JGB rarely, perhaps never, acknowledges two incentives for the initiation or escalation of a nuclear war by "rational" leaders:
1) damage-limiting by offensive use, essentially by preemption against offensive capabilities and command and control;
2) unilateral tactical use to win a limited war against a non-nuclear opponent or an opponent who foregoes retaliation (or limits it sharply).

Neither of these offers any guarantee of remaining limited or of limiting damage significantly in general war; but neither can be proved to be wholly, certainly infeasible or unrewarding (especially considering the possibility of effective and paralyzing decapitation, in the case of damage-limiting; and of restraint by the opponent's nuclear-armed ally, in the other case).

Given the hypothetical possibility that either of these incentives could look less catastrophic than its immediate alternatives--and the actual history of crises in which the latter circumstances came close to arising--it is simply not literally true that the leaders of nuclear states (the US, at least) have ever accepted what Blight calls "the central lesson of the nuclear age and of the Cuban missile crisis": that "nuclear war must never be fought." Not only does the US prepare and threaten to take such initiatives in possible circumstances, of a sort that have come close to arising in the past, but at least some leaders have given every sign of being able and willing to contemplate carrying out the existing plans in some circumstances.

"Must not be fought" then means, not "Must not be initiated under any imaginable circumstances, whatever the plans and threats and commitments have said," but rather, "Must be avoided if at all possible--unless necessary in the light of our interests and

obligations, the state of threat warnings, and the nature of alternatives; circumstances which would make nuclear war necessary or optimal are to be avoided, if possible. But if they nevertheless arise...."

It is not exactly an "error" to suppose that an opponent might not respond to our nuclear attack on its client or ally; nor is it an "error" or "miscalculation" to gamble on this possibility, if failure of our hopes has been foreseen as a possibility and its probability has been estimated in some "reasonable" relation to evidence and premises, none of which may be "mistaken," though the evidence is subject to "noise" and uncertainty. If the opponent does respond, the resulting war is rather misleadingly described as "inadvertent," since the consequences of actions may be--though undesired--not unforeseen, but rather (perhaps imprudently, unwisely) accepted as possibilities, even probabilities. (If I lose all my money at the racetrack, is this always well described as "inadvertent"?)

Errors of perception and reasoning and prediction, and loss of control--by central authority, or even by all human agency--are real possibilities and sources of nuclear risk; but in the light of the above incentives on both sides, they are not the only source on either side. They were not so seen in the Missile Crisis, nor are they so seen since.

JGB is almost mute about the actions that were most likely to initiate nuclear war (aside from the possibility that a low-level Soviet or Cuban would attack the US without higher orders, true "inadvertence" from the point of view of central authorities). These would nearly all be US actions; and probably not by subordinates but by Presidential decision. Where is the "inadvertence"? Possible, but not even primary. Nor need the Soviet actions that led to this US decision be clear "errors" or "miscalculations": they could be conscious gambles, in which the risks, clearly seen, were reasonably calculated, and the willingness to accept the risks reflective of long- and widely-accepted evaluations of national interest. Misperceptions--as distinct from uncertainties and willingness to gamble--are not necessary to this result on either side.

--JGB's whole exposition suggests that what is being explained is a willingness by JFK, in the final stage of the evolving crisis, to compromise on what were previously seen as essential demands, to back away from previous commitments and threats, in order to settle the conflict without violence.

The explanation of this supposed, and supposedly problematic decision is his rapidly increasing awareness during the crisis of the risk that either he or Khrushchev would soon lose control of events and become incapable of avoiding war, perhaps even all out war, with the latter possibility becoming, inevitably, unprecedently vivid and abhorrent to him, controlling his

responses--basically, making him incapable of actions that maintained or increased the risks of armed conflict--in a way that can be predicted to be almost inevitable in future, equally severe nuclear crises, in contrast to past non-nuclear crises that did lead to war).

The actual history of the crisis, including parts "strangely" underemphasized by Blight (as well as parts he could not know), lends little support to this explanation or prediction, since the premise is counterfactual; JFK made no such decision or response. The closest he came to it was to postpone the previously-agreed response to the U-2 shootdown (which he had not expected to occur), committing himself (more strongly than before) to carry it out on the next occurrence. And he did wish to settle the conflict immediately, rather than let it drag on: and in large part, for fear of eventual loss of control, before long, by either Khrushchev or himself.

But the step he took was to increase, not reduce, the level of confrontation, to sharpen the threat and give it a short deadline, to make (for the first time) an ultimatum: whose seriousness as a coercive threat is precisely indicated, among other things, by Robert Kennedy's refusal to acknowledge to Dobrynin that it was an ultimatum or to make it public (either of which would have made it much harder, or impossible, for the Soviets to accept).

Unless JGB believed that Khrushchev "had" to back down in face of this--which he doesn't, and JFK didn't--this increased the risk of war with the Soviet Union. "Objectively," i.e., from the point of view of a well-informed observer who knew what JFK did not, this risk had been increased to near-certainty unless Khrushchev backed down within 12 hours (which he did), since Castro was highly likely (he felt certain) to succeed in shooting down one or more of the low-altitude planes that were scheduled for the following day, as well as having an uncertain possibility of firing another SAM.

JGB seems to be impressed by the fact that JFK was more moderate in his policy than LeMay--or even Maxwell Taylor--that he ignores the fact that Kennedy did not compromise at all in his essential demand that the missiles must go, nor did he make a concession on the Turkish missiles--that they could be traded publicly--which might have persuaded Khrushchev to settle without the specific, secret fear of Castro's action.

It was only Khrushchev, not Kennedy, who made essential concessions to end the crisis, and he (almost surely) did it because of specific expectations of loss of control unknown to Blight (or Kennedy).

The lesson of Kennedy's behavior is his unwillingness to compromise despite his fear of nuclear war, inadvertent or US-chosen; and his willingness to make threats to deter certain

actions, without even considering the possibility--which happened to be the case--that these actions were not under the control of the opponent he was threatening. (This despite the fact that he did consider the possibility that this opponent might lose control of other sorts of actions under future circumstances).

Thus, even without knowledge of the SAM situation (given which, there is little that needs explaining in Khrushchev's behavior, i.e., his backdown) JGB's whole argument would seem relevant, and plausible, in explaining Khrushchev's, not Kennedy's, behavior in the end-game. (Why they took the earlier gambles they did, and persisted in them so long, would still need explaining). From JGB's point of view, what needs explaining is why JFK was still gambling and newly threatening on Saturday afternoon, October 27! For this he has no explanation.

His approach could also be used to explain JFK's behavior after the missile crisis, after Khrushchev backed down. (119)

What is demonstrated is:

--The real risk of loss of control, inadvertent war.

--The risk that fear of loss of control will lead to new threats and commitments, aggressive initiatives (in order to win the crisis before loss of control: which may even have already occurred, without the threatener's awareness).

--The real risk of catalytic war. (Regarded as near-impossible by many theorists of rational action who believe in superpower prudence and strategic stability).

--The risk that fear of nuclear war and of loss of control will not result in a willingness to stop gambling, to compromise, to withdraw and desist from threatening, commitments, preparations for attack (it may, as above, even lead to increasing the stakes and making new threats).

--It may not be the US leader who is most prudent, most impressed by the risk of inadvertence or of nuclear war (It was not, in this case, contrary to Blight's assumption that "both" were, with the analysis concentrating exclusively, wrongly, on Kennedy).

--JGB's analysis does explain one party's behavior--a different party from the one he discusses, and for reasons he only partly knows--and thus shows how future crises could/might be resolved without violence. But since this reasoning does not, contrary to his claim, apply to both participants--specifically, not to the one he examines, not to "our side"--it does not give us the degree of reassurance he claims that future crises will end without nuclear war.

It may indeed be the case that all participants will feel the kind of fear he postulates (though it seems that his interviews since this book was written have turned up a number of high-level participants who failed to feel or validate this fear). But all it would take for war to occur next time would be for both sides to behave as Kennedy actually did! (And this without claiming that Kennedy was "irrational" in any sense of the word that Blight

would accept. However, if JGB really faced up to what JFK really did--especially in the light of the actual circumstances, not known to Kennedy but not all that difficult to imagine as a possibility, which Kennedy failed to do--he might want to expand his notions of "irrationality," or "immorality," in the area of gambles.

The actual US phenomenon to be explained is why JFK suddenly made an ultimatum, on the night of Oct 27. "Why the hurry," as Blight asked. To this, it is true, JFK's fear of events slipping out of the leaders' control was relevant, crucial; but it combined with his continued determination (which Blight does not examine critically) to end the crisis with victory, to achieve his basic demands, despite the risk (which he had just heightened and foreshortened), to cause him, in the face of danger, to "flee forward": a response familiar in the trench warfare of WWI.

Thus, to this question, JGB points to an important explaining variable; but its effect on US behavior was just opposite to what his overall argument presumes. In light of this argument, the question to JGB is: Why didn't JFK simply accept the 27 OCT Khrushchev proposal, to trade the Turkish missiles. That is, to do so without making a crucial modification that the trade be secret and denied by both sides (which shifted the perception of the outcome, when Khrushchev unexpectedly accepted the modified proposal, from being "fair" or even a Khrushchev victory to being an unequivocal Soviet defeat, which later cost K his job).

JGB clearly supposes that it was JFK's concessions, not his threats (which were simply "inherent in the situation, in his past decisions, a statement of fact, not a threat," i.e., not his responsibility as of Oct.27 (irreversible? Khrushchev managed to reverse the irreversible quickly enough when he got scared)) that resolved the crisis. (e.g. 165; or, this whole chapter). But in fact (!) these concessions probably had no effect at all on the resolution; they did nothing to make Khrushchev's backdown more palatable or easier for him to make; he couldn't even refer to them at home. (i.e. the Turkish missiles. The no-invasion pledge wasn't worth much in itself, and was effectively withdrawn soon). Castro not only was not impressed, he was furious, for years.

It was the threat that was crucial, and probably necessary to the outcome. And the fear of loss of control by JFK was probably not only salient, it was effective in influencing him to make this threat. That is, this fear (along with a continued fear of losing face, an intense desire to avoid humiliation) probably was important in helping JFK overcome his immediate fear of, his reluctance to issue an ultimatum! (The latter was second only to his fear of launching an immediate attack: a decision he postponed, by his ultimatum, for 48 hours).

JFK did act to reduce the risks, in this sense; he figured that without the ultimatum--but given his so-far-unquestioned determination to have the missiles removed, and his unwillingness,

still late Saturday night, to make a public trade of the Turkish missiles or give up Guantanamo (Stevenson's "shameful" proposal, and Castro's preference for a deal: see Szulc)--the risks of war in the next few days would be even higher than they would be with the explicit, private ultimatum-and-offer. He may even have been willing to go beyond this offer--Rusk told Blair that he was preparing to consider accepting an "offer" from U Thant to make the public trade, later, if necessary, if K rejected the ultimatum. What he didn't know, and didn't figure into his possibilities, was that the situation was already beyond his control, made so by a combination of Castro's initiative on the SAMS and the AA and his ultimatum. So far, he still accepted the picture of the general Neustadt quotes at RAND, after the crisis, that "Khrushchev was rational"--and in full control. He was wrong.

JGB addresses (167) why the participants remain "ambivalent" about the role of dread, of risk and fear of inadvertent war, of loss of control, or simply the risk of war. I suggest that some of these participants--e.g., McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Sorensen--otherwise have values and a perspective that makes it very hard for them to explain, to understand, to live with, the fact that it was Khrushchev, and not they or their President, who backed down and made decisive concessions, in face of shared risks that they, in fact, put as high as he did.

My own immediate reaction on hearing how high JFK put these risks was: "How could he have done what he did?" (And left undone what he did). (I didn't agree with that estimate, any more than Schelling does now; I was wrong, as Tom apparently still is). But the members of the Gang of 4 (for no first use) must still be asking themselves: "How could I?"

They tell themselves, blindly, that they weren't making nuclear threats, at least; yet another question they would have to face, if they were more realistic, is how they could have been willing to continue a process that would lead to US-initiated nuclear war if it led to nuclear war at all, which apparently, like the President, they put at a high probability.

(No wonder McGeorge Bundy was so vehement when he first heard me say that Kennedy had made nuclear threats, pounding the table to deny it. It was not just Kennedy; he had gone along.) The threat was not more definite--but not less so--than in 1973. I suspect the crisis was not actually less dangerous in 1973, though less public. Probably, the later crew was less anguished about it; and had, indeed, less time to reflect on the actual risks.

Actually, this may be why they remain so surprised that Khrushchev did back down, and find it puzzling to this day. They can't admit that they should have; they prefer to think that it was "impossible, unthinkable" for either side to do, by that time, what Khrushchev did do. (They didn't, and don't, perceive Khrushchev to have been a coward, or panicked. And they specifically reject the notion--underrating it, in fact--that

nuclear asymmetry was a decisive factor. So why did K quit? It has to remain problematic; or else they must face the question: Why didn't they? (Their whole understanding of the nuclear era and balance emphasizes its practical symmetry, even in 1962 or earlier. I don't agree with them on that; yet now that I appreciate the real uncertainties in warfare, and the psychological propensities of ruling elites, I see great risks in the crisis despite the great asymmetry in US favor. And I hope and believe that, understanding that then, I would have urgently advised concessions. I have some basis for supposing that I would have done so. They did not.

Blair clearly has a strong desire to absolve, and admire, JFK (and these now-dovish advisors). Else how could he so systematically ignore that JFK made a dual decision during Saturday: a) he chose not to strike immediately against the SAM site that had fired, changing his earlier plan, while committing himself to continue recon and strike immediately after the next shootdown; this is what Blair focusses exclusively on, along with his decision to offer a private trade of the missiles (worthless, in prospect and in the event);

(b) he chose to postpone an offer that--Rusk told Blair--he was actually willing to make, or to contemplate, but "not yet"; instead he explicitly rejected this offer (for a public trade of the missiles), with no hint that he might later change his mind, that it was negotiable. That was the equivalent of Truman's deciding, at Potsdam, not to carry out his assurance to Grew and others that he would make the Japanese an explicit offer to keep the Emperor, even though he was privately willing to accept that and in the end did accept it.

To say (as Blair did in his letter to me) that Kennedy was willing to do that, is to say that Robert Kennedy's assertion that the missiles would be struck inexorably in 48 hours if they were not removed, and that the Turkish missiles were non-negotiable (in public) were not statements of fact. They were, indeed, false, in the Kennedy brothers' eyes (though, for reasons unknown to them, they might have come true!). They thought they were in control of their own actions (or else, by Blair's own reasoning, they could hardly have postponed the offer they were willing to make if the ultimatum failed).

In other words, it was unequivocally an ultimatum; perhaps a bluff, but definitely not a simple "statement of fact." (p. 168) This much, by the way, is obvious from the well-known facts of the case (as nearly all the participants acknowledge); Blair's description of it seems blatantly to be psychological denial on his part, for whatever reason.

As for their public denials of the existence of great fear on their part: they hardly wish to face the question of why they were willing to incur such risks, on the part of the nation! (How do

they explain it to themselves?) (p. 168 The same for Khrushchev (p. 170)

--Some of the surprises to participants:

--K's decision to put missiles in.

--K's "lies."

--K's decision to take the missiles out: so quickly, without temporizing about Turkish missiles, other offers or threats.

--Thus, that the crisis was resolved (successfully) so soon: rather than after months, and without violence.

--JGB 179: Failure of SU to respond forcefully to Pres speech, or to onset of blockade; turnaround of Sov ships.

--Speedup of events on Saturday, 27 Oct: and events themselves, including ultimatum.

--Aspects not known to the public.

--Actual strategic balance.

--near-certainty that missiles would be discovered before they were operational. (Why no camouflage? No use of SAMs? Why the rush to complete? Why did the odds look acceptable to K, given this: during the decision period; and especially, after JFK's threats?)

--The fact that many of the decision-makers put the odds of war as high as the most worried members of the public (yet went ahead: they didn't publicize their fear so as not to have to explain this during the crisis, or afterward). Also, the vividness of the fears of nuclear war by some, such as Pres and McN.

--Presidential, and other, certainty that the crisis would spread to Berlin and Turkey if they invaded.

--The Mongoose campaign--which gave some credibility to K's claim of protection for Cuba.

(Lack of awareness of this meant K got even less credit for winning any concession from the no-invasion pledge; made it look more like a victory for US).

--The assassination campaign against Castro (Mafia, CIA).

--JCS desire to invade Cuba.

--McNamara (Taylor) judgement that the missiles in Cuba were not strategically important ((yet they did reduce American superiority, to something like parity: especially if in large numbers. McN downplays significance of this, but SU did not))

--JFK awareness of the symmetry of the Turkish missile situation, frustration at failure to remove them earlier, willingness to defuse missiles, trade them privately, even trade them publicly if necessary (but decision to wait to do this: which led to a win, unsullied by resentment in Turkey/NATO except, later, for France, and by opposition in JCS and right; but which might have led to war, if Castro had moved before K did).

--K's timing of move in relation to elections; based on past reasons to believe that US President might have "collaborated" in keeping movement secret before elections. (But did he underestimate pressure on Pres to invade Cuba, and possible willingness of Pres to "lead" that movement before the elections?)

--JFK/RFK ultimatum: two parts.

--JFK/RFK offer on Turkish missiles, on condition of secrecy.

--Who shot down the U2. (Still not known by EXCOMM

--Castro's claims after the crisis that he had shot down.

--Shootdown of low-level plane on the 5th.

--Fomin offer (on the night of the 26th): to which RFK was really responding, not the K letter of the 26th. (Not known to most EXCOMM, including McCone.)

--Stevenson (and still secretly, Rusk!) willingness to deal, to give up Guantanamo (Castro condition for deal) and/or Turkish missiles. (See Katzenbach). See C:CII\Blight.1